

American Public Opinion (V53.0342)

Fall 2007

Professor Patrick Egan

Mondays and Wednesdays, 3:30 – 4:45

Description for Fall 2007: What do Americans think about politics? Why do they hold these beliefs? And does it matter? This course grapples with these three questions, which lie at the core of our understanding of the health of American democratic society. In doing so, the class will give students the tools they need to critically assess the construction, conduct, and reporting of public opinion surveys.

The course will cover topics such as:

- The history of survey research in America, its growing role in American political life, and how public opinion surveys are conducted today in person, over the phone, and via the Internet;
- The extent to which Americans are remarkably uninformed about public affairs, and whether public opinion can be meaningful or rational given this;
- Americans' attitudes and beliefs about important public policy issues, and how these beliefs have changed over time;
- Models of opinion formation and opinion change developed by political scientists;
- The extent to which elected officials pay attention to public opinion when making policy, and whether they instead attempt to change the public's mind; and
- Case studies of recent controversies and incidents in which public opinion and surveys have played a key role, including: exit polls in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections; collecting and measuring public opinion in war-torn Iraq; polling in the age of "do not call lists," cell phones and the Internet; and use of polls by the Clinton and Bush administrations to determine how to "sell" their policies to the American public.

The course syllabus is still being finalized, but representative texts from which readings might be drawn include:

- Delli Carpini, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters* (1997)
- Edwards, *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit* (2003)
- Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson. *The Macro Polity*. (2002)
- Page and Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences* (1992)
- Stimson, *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics* (2004)
- Zaller, *Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (1992)